



Improving Results in Early Childhood

"The comprehensive planning process has given stakeholders an important role in informing OSEP on how IDEA Part D national activities can help improve results for children with disabilities."

Lou Danielson, Ph.D.
Director of OSEP's Division of Research to Practice

Experts Inform Part D National Program Plan

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) launched a long-range, comprehensive planning process for Part D of the reauthorized 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. OSEP's goal for its Part D national program is to link best practices to states, school systems, and families to improve results for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. Part D of IDEA '97 authorizes national program activities and federal funding (see figure, this page).

OSEP undertook a significant initiative in implementing the Part D national program comprehensive planning process. Among

the activities undertaken were:

- Solicit opinions about the Part D national program through mass distribution of an opinion survey.
- Convene experts to identify issues in key program areas and make recommendations for how the Part D national program may address them.
- Use recommendations from the opinion survey, panels, and other national and state sources to develop a five-year Part D national program plan.

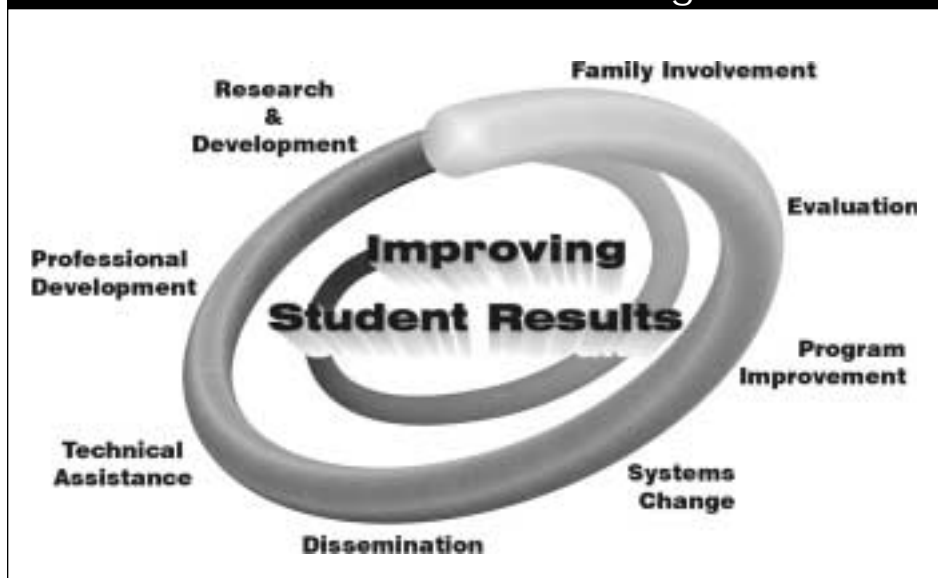
This brief focuses on the opinions of national authorities regarding improving results for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities and their families.

Findings

IDEA '97 authorizes services for children with disabilities and their families from birth through age 2 under Part C, and for preschool children, age 3-5 years, under Part B. Early childhood results typically refer to improved development for children in their first five years, as well as improved family capacity for supporting their children's development. Early intervention services are meant to enhance children's functional development through effective, family-focused services. Preschool services should allow children to participate in regular education settings with non-disabled age appropriate peers, preparing children with disabilities for elementary school success.

The authorities identified four issues to be addressed in improving results for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities

IDEA Part D National Program



and their families. They also suggested how Part D national program activities in part might address these issues through research and knowledge building, public awareness and support, and capacity building.

Issue 1: Early identification must be expanded and improved.

Gaps in information, tools and practices, training, and policy inhibit the early identification of children with special needs. Many children are not referred because families and professionals, as well as community members in general, are unaware of screening, evaluation, and early intervention services. To improve referral, intake, and access to early intervention and preschool programs for families with children with disabilities, efforts must be made to broaden parent information as well as public and professional awareness.

To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might support research and knowledge production that identifies effective strategies for reaching underserved and hard-to-reach children, families, and communities (e.g., identification, evaluation, and delivery of services). In addition, Part D national program activities may address broad-based information needs of families, professionals, and the general public.

Issue 2: More and better qualified personnel are needed to serve the needs of young children with disabilities.

There is a shortage of personnel qualified to work with young children, including a lack of pediatricians in many communities. Great disparities in personnel development exist across states, professions, and employers. In general, training for infant/toddler caregivers is minimal, which contributes to overall personnel problems.

To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might build capacity by supporting the development and dissemination of effective training methods. In addition, research and knowledge production might address policy issues at the state and local levels related to personnel development.

Issue 3: Collaboration among all stakeholders is needed.

While all states have developed early intervention programs, and several states have developed specific preschool policies involving the use of Individual Family Service Plans (IFSPs), service delivery still lacks the collaboration needed to ensure that an appropriate variety of services are available to children age birth through five. There is a continued need to develop models that support community-based collaboration among agencies, families, and service providers at state and local levels. The purpose of such models is to enhance services, foster transition, and coordinate funding of high quality early intervention and preschool programs.

Gaps in dissemination, tools and practices, training, and policy inhibit effective collaboration. To this end, authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might support research and knowledge production that addresses effective collaboration, and explores policies facilitative of collaboration.

Issue 4: Outcomes and indicators to guide early childhood services must be developed.

Presently, there is a lack of agreement about outcomes and indicators for effective early childhood services. Available data tend to describe numbers of children, service hours, and dollars, but not child and family outcomes.

Meaningful process and outcome indicators should be developed to guide early childhood services for children, families, and communities. To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might support research and knowledge production that address the development of outcomes and indicators of effective early childhood services, and identify effective practices that utilize data to improve practices and outcomes. In addition, the policies that facilitate information gathering and sharing across agencies, systems, and programs might be studied.

Next Steps

OSEP staff members are currently discussing the implications of expert opinions. Their results, along with those of the consumer survey and other relevant planning information—such as the findings of Parts B and C monitoring and oversight efforts and State Improvement Grant Program proposals, as required under Part D, Subpart 2 of IDEA—are being integrated by agency-wide staff workgroups into a comprehensive Part D national program plan. The public will be invited to comment on the Part D national program plan before it is presented to Congress for approval. ■

**The comprehensive planning process is authorized by IDEA [sec.661(1)].*

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Renée Bradley, Ph.D.
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Special Education Programs
330 C Street SW, Room 3531
Washington, DC 20202
202-358-2849
Renée_Bradley@ed.gov